

The prospect of a government shutdown loomed larger on Capitol Hill on Thursday when Republican leaders ruled out the easiest path around a budget impasse and Democrats accused them of playing a dangerous game of chicken.

Tensions over funding the government for the rest of this year escalated as House Republicans crept closer to approval of massive spending cuts to social services, environmental programs, foreign aid and research.

The package, amounting to more than \$61 billion, is five times larger than any previous discretionary budget reduction proposed in the House, Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) said, and makes good on a Republican campaign promise to make swift and substantial spending cuts.

But the plan is unlikely to get far when it moves to the Democratic-led Senate. It also has been rejected by the Obama administration as potentially harmful to the frail economic recovery.

The resulting stalemate comes with a firm deadline: Current funding for the government expires March 4.

With the House still debating the GOP package, Democrats had widely expected Republican leaders to agree to temporarily extend current spending levels, giving both sides more time to negotiate. But Boehner rejected that approach Thursday.

"When we say we're going to cut spending, read my lips: We're going to cut spending," he told reporters.

Boehner's blunt declaration immediately turned up the heat on the spending talks.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) suggested it was evidence that Boehner "can't control the votes in his caucus" and had resorted to threats of a shutdown.

"It's not permissible. We will not stand for that," Reid said.

Democrats argued that a resolution extending the budget at current levels would already include spending reductions. About \$41 billion in cuts was included when the current spending plan was put in place by the last Congress.

That argument is unlikely to placate the most ardent budget hawks in the Republican House. These lawmakers, many of them freshmen, have shown a near-singular focus on shrinking the size of the government.

Many took the \$61 billion offered in the GOP bill as a mere starting point and have proposed hundreds of amendments to further reduce spending. Debate was expected to extend late into Thursday night.

In early votes, the House voted to take \$20 million out of the National Endowment for the Arts and to cut the remaining \$15 million out of a trust fund for the Presidio historic site in San Francisco.

The House also approved an amendment aimed at blocking so-called net neutrality rules. The amendment, proposed by Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.), bars the use of funds to enforce Federal Communications Commission rules pertaining to Internet regulation.

Other measures were rejected, however, including a proposal to cut \$233 million from the National Labor Relations Board and another to cut Amtrak by \$447 million.

Still, House Republicans said they felt the momentum was with the budget cutters and that a Senate proposal would have to include substantial reductions to win a majority in the House.

"I don't see the stomach here to cave in," said seven-term **Rep. Lee Terry (R-Neb.)**.

Mindful of the political blowback from a 1995 government shutdown, Democrats have tried to blame the GOP-led House for the escalating tensions, saying they have recklessly pursued cuts at the urging of members aligned with the "tea party."

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) called on Republicans to "take the government shutdown option off the table," and introduced legislation to cut off lawmakers' paychecks if a shutdown occurs.

Republicans accused Democrats of "rooting for a shutdown" instead of working toward solving the deficit.

